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ABSTRACT

One way to involve parents in their children's education is to create a parent center in or near the school. In an informal setting, parents can meet other parents and their children's teachers to plan activities and exchange information. The center should be in an accessible location and open when parents are most likely to visit, such as early morning and evening. It should be attractive and safe, with information about the school and materials to help parents promote their children's learning. To start a parent center, it is first of all necessary to identify the needs and resources of the school's community. Because parents should be involved in the planning, contacting and involving families is essential. Setting priorities and recruiting staff follow closely. Parents should then choose activities based on their needs and wishes. Some of the most popular objectives for parent centers are parent outreach programs and children's programs. Parent-school activities also find a home at the parent center, where communication is facilitated and relations with school staff are promoted. (SLD)

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for parents/about parents

ED 401 350

A GUIDE TO CREATING A PARENT CENTER IN AN URBAN SCHOOL

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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One way to involve parents in their children's education is to create a parent center, in or near a school. There, in an informal setting, parents can meet other parents and their children's teachers, plan activities, and exchange information. Parent centers are especially welcome in urban areas. In cities, the pressures of everyday life and feelings of isolation can prevent families from helping their children learn and from participating in school activities.

Parents centers are also valuable for schools. They provide a place where teachers, counselors, and administrators can hear parents' concerns; where parents and school people can come to understand, respect, and support each other; and where school people have access to the abilities and energies of committed volunteers.

Many Federal and local programs to improve the achievement of urban and poor children include parent involvement activities, so funds to set up a parent center may be available.

What Is a Good Parent Center?

A successful parent center is a place where people have worthwhile experiences. It provides parents with news about their children and the school, and it helps them feel positively about their children's education and their role in encouraging their children to learn.

The center should be located in an accessible place. It should be open at the times when parents are most likely to visit—possibly in the early morning and evening. And it should be attractive and safe, with comfortable places to sit, read, and talk.

The center should have information about the school, and materials to help parents improve their ability to promote their children's learning—books and pamphlets, videos, and, ideally, a computer with an Internet connection.

The center should schedule events when most parents can attend, offer refreshments, and provide child care. It should be serious in its business of helping parents, but should schedule some fun activities to attract new participants.

How Do We Start a Parent Center?

A parent center is most likely to be used by parents when they are involved in designing and

operating it. It is also useful to involve school staff members, though, so that they will feel welcome there and so that the center can take advantage of all available school resources.

Identify Needs and Resources

The group of people, usually including both parents and school staff, that wants to start a parent center should begin to plan it by asking these questions:

- What do families need from the center?
- What can families contribute to the creation and operation of the center—time, materials, skills?
- What resources are available in the school and community—space, materials and equipment, volunteer time, expert advice?
- What do families feel about the school?
- What do school staff members feel about the families and how do they act toward the families?
- What obstacles must be overcome?
- What realistic goals can be set?

Planners should find at least a temporary site for the parent center and secure some funding. Then, parents invited to join in the planning will see that the center is real and not just a dream that will waste their time.

Contact and Involve Families

Hold a First Meeting. After the organizers develop a general plan for the parent center, based on the questions above, the next step is to hold a meeting to involve more parents. If organizers do not yet feel comfortable in the school, the first meeting can be held in a home, church, or community center. One goal of the meeting is to recruit more parents as planners. Another is to encourage parents to use the center when it begins operating.

Communicate with Parents. Organizers should get parents interested by talking with them face-to-face, or even visiting them. They can also use the telephone, notes, and signs, but these are not nearly as successful as direct communication in promoting parents' involvement. Because limited English speaking parents often do not feel comfortable or welcome at school activities, it is helpful for recruiters to speak with them in their native language and reassure them that language differences will not prevent them from getting benefits from it.

Set Priorities. At the first meeting parents should be encouraged to talk about how they want the center to help them, their children, and the school. School staff may also have suggestions, and frequently they are the same as the parents', but the wishes of the parents should come first.

Recruit Staff

A parent center should be staffed by parents. Staff duties include: hosting other parents who visit; buying, or asking for gifts of, equipment, library materials, and other resources; contacting parents personally who may need help; recruiting volunteers for the center and for school activities; organizing center activities; and arranging meetings. In some schools Title I funds can be used to hire a staff coordinator and pay other expenses.

What Are Some Parent Center Projects?

Parents should choose projects for their center based on their needs and wishes, and on the time and resources of the center. Among the most popular activities of parent centers now operating are these:

Parent Outreach

There are special challenges in raising a family in urban areas. So it is especially important to reach out to parents in cities because school staff alone may not be able to involve them. Offering parents information about their children's education and development, and even small useful gifts, can encourage their participation. Another inducement is asking for a contribution to the center—such as baked goods for a meeting or decorations for the walls—so parents will feel valued. Fathers, who may be harder to recruit than mothers, can be asked to do carpentry. Connecting families with health and social service agencies can also encourage center participation.

Most parents have knowledge and talents that they can share with others, so they can become involved in the center as both teachers and

learners. For example, parents can teach computer skills or English language skills to other parents, and parents can trade tips on helping their children with their homework.

Children's Projects

Children should always be present in the center, in spirit if not in person. Dinners, pot luck meals, and picnics can bring together the children—and other relatives—of center parents for games and other types of play. Projects that recognize children's achievement can boost parents' esteem—so children's artwork can be displayed and award dinners can recognize children's accomplishments.

Center projects can help children directly. A tutoring program can use volunteer parents, community members, and teachers. A mentoring program can match children with respected members of the community. Before- and after-school activities can keep children busy so they don't have to be alone when their parents aren't home.

Parent-School Activities

Develop Relations with School Staff. The center can be a place where parents, teachers, and other school people get to know each other, and explain what they expect from each other. One way to make everyone's expectations clear is for parents, teachers, and students to create and sign learning contracts.

Meetings and events where parents and teachers talk about their native cultures and lives—and where school people describe the school's programs and goals—are good occasions for breaking down barriers that prevent parents from participating in school activities. The center can also arrange for teams of parents and school people to resolve family-school conflicts and solve problems.

Manage School-Parent Communication. The center can take over much of the school's dealings with parents. It can collect and share important information about school programs, rules, and needs; and help parents contact teachers and administrators. It can keep parents aware of what their children are learning and their homework assignments, so they can help at home. It can pass along suggestions from the school about how to promote their children's learning by reading with them or taking them to local cultural institutions.

The parent center can make contact between parents and the school easier by helping parents understand the school routine and rules, directing parents to the school staff member who can give them what they need, and setting up meetings.

To make the job of school staff easier, the center can collect information from parents that the school can use to improve its programs for students and its communication with families.

This guide was written by Wendy Schwartz. It is based on **Building a Successful Parent Center in an Urban School**, *a digest by Larry Yates, published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a list of other publications.*

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You can reach the NPIN World Wide Web at http://ericps.ed.uiuc, or the NPIN Gopher at gopher://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

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